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The Sincerest Form of Flattery: Modern Art and the Kimono

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In 2003 I enrolled in a master's degree program in arts administration. In addition to such classes as exhibition planning, appraisals, and computer applications, we had two sweeping modern art surveys, which took us from the birth of impressionism in the 1860s to emerging artists of the 21st century.

For one end term project, we each had to design a complete hypothetical exhibition, from mission statement to budget to invitation card to gallery space. The only restriction was that we had to demonstrate on paper that we could actually pull it off.

At that time, I had recently seen a kimono in a catalogue from the Honolulu Academy of Arts for an exhibition of early 20th century Japanese art entitled *Taisho Chic* that had all the characteristics of a work by Miró, one of the artists in the program's survey.¹

Codes et Constellations Dans L'Amour D'Une Femme, dated 1941² is an actual Miró. Without a catalogue raisonné, it is not possible to say that the kimono is an exact copy of a Miró, but it is evident the textile artist who created this design was consciously copying Miró's style.

At the time, modern art prices were going through the roof, and art fairs had begun showing the occasional modern art kimono at elegant prices, so based on those connections, I decided to do an exhibition of ten modern art kimonos as my project. A beginning gallerist could budget for them, and my informal study of trends indicated that they would sell well. I drew a diagram of my apartment, where I would hold my exhibition to cut costs, and showed how I would hang and label each one.

Preparing the exhibition started me wondering what sources the textile artists had used. On the one hand, Japan did participate in international art and trade fairs, so its governmental or trade representatives abroad, or their foreign counterparts at fairs in Japan, might have carried with them small numbers of expensive color reproductions (post cards, brochures, etc.) made for distribution. On the other hand, Japanese museums and private collections are understocked, and would not have been primary sources. Artworks could not have been hand copied in sufficient number to inspire a trend so deep and so long. While Japan had a period of great prosperity prior to World War II, the war left Japan impoverished, and prevented many Japanese from traveling abroad for years. Finally, color photography did not come into common use until after World War II, so art books would have been primarily in black and white. Yet the textile colors were very faithful to the painting colors. What were their sources?

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to show a selection of kimonos that quote or paraphrase masters of modern art; and second, to explore possible sources of inspiration, and how they might have reached Japan. I did not view 20th century kimono design archives, or speak directly to designers, so I will present the evidence I found in other research, and let the audience draw its own conclusions.

¹ Not reproduced here. See Kendall H. Brown and Sharon A. Minichiello, *Taisho Chic: Japanese Modernity, Nostalgia, And Deco* (Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2005), 157, plate 71.

² Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

In chronological order, let's start with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907³, and compare it to a kimono from the book *Fashioning Kimono*, a catalogue of part of the Montgomery Collection.⁴ The sharp angles, the women's darkened noses, the cross hatching and the variety of skin tones are echoed in the kimono. To claim that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the textile artist's source would be overreaching, but it is no stretch of the imagination to see that the design is derived from Cubism.



Figure 1 (left). Orphist kimono.
Figure 2 (right). Suprematist kimono.

Next let us view the work of Ukrainian-born Sonia Delaunay, who moved to Paris in 1905.⁵ In the 1910s, she was celebrated for her work in orphism, a facet of cubism. Compare any of several Delaunay works with an orphist kimono.⁶ The textile artist has used very muted colors, so it is probably not from the same period. In fact, one wonders if the textile designer was interpreting a black and white photograph, but the orphist origin of the design is very clear.

Liubov Popova's Suprematist painting, *Painterly Architectonics with a Pink Semicircle*, dated 1918⁷, is dominated by angles and shading.

Now let's look at a kimono.⁸ The exaggeratedly long sleeves indicate that this was probably made around 1912 to 1926, so the designer of this kimono might very well have seen Russian Suprematist art while it was still evolving. In his essay for the catalogue accompanying *Scream Against the Sky*, the Guggenheim's exhibition of Japanese art after 1945, John Clark writes of Japanese Futurism: "... in the early 1920s, the movement was considerably helped by the

³ Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

⁴ Not reproduced here. See Annie Van Assche, ed., *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*, (5 Continents Editions, Milan, Italy, 2005), p. 272, plate 102.

⁵ Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

⁶ See Figure 1 – Orphist kimono. All images reproduced here are the property of the author and may not be reproduced without her prior written permission.

⁷ Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

⁸ See Figure 2 – Suprematist kimono

presence in Japan of the Russian Futurist David Burliuk from October 1920 to August 1922, who brought work from Russia and showed his own.”⁹



Figure 3. Malevich panel.

Numerous Suprematist works by Kazimir Malevich feature a very simple background and just a few sharply geometric elements which consume the entire frame.¹⁰

Now let's look at a kimono panel.¹¹ This designer put the motif in a traditional Japanese context, but the motif itself is very breakaway. In later years, all references to Japanese design will disappear from modern art kimonos. A 1916 woodcut entitled *Markwippach*, by American artist Lyonel Feininger, shows the influence of the German Expressionists, with whom he studied.¹² At the time they were turning out large numbers of linocuts and woodcuts, techniques underscoring the edgy nature of German Expressionism. The rooftop theme was popular then, showing up in works by Klimt, Schiele and Popova as well.

Compare that to a close-up of a Japanese kimono featuring rooftops in woodcut style¹³, and to the entire kimono.¹⁴

⁹ John Clark, “Artistic Subjectivity in the Taisho and Early Showa Avant-Garde”, in *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 52.

¹⁰ Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

¹¹ See Figure 3 – Malevich panel.

¹² Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

¹³ See Figure 4 – woodcut style, detail.

¹⁴ See Figure 5 – woodcut style.



Figure 4 (left). Kimono with woodcut rooftops (detail).

Figure 5 (right). Kimono with woodcut rooftops.

Kimono motifs in the early part of the century could tend to be exaggerated in size. The motifs on the woodblock design kimono are fairly small, so this design was made later, but although Japan has its own strong woodblock tradition, it seems almost certain that this designer was following the German Expressionist style.

Generally, there is far less German-influenced design in kimonos than French, Russian or American-influenced design. There are several plausible reasons for this, which will not be explored here. Suffice it to say that while early 20th century German art was revered in Japanese art circles, Paris was the undisputed heart of Europe's art scene until World War II, and received far more exposure worldwide.

In France, such magazines as *Derrière le Miroir*, *Minotaure*, *Vingtième Siècle* and *Cahiers d'Art* chronicled the French art scene, even inserting original lithographs and hand colored stencils (called pochoirs) in certain issues, as well as publishing selected images in what was then a very expensive color printing process. For example, a 1933 issue of *Minotaure* contained – in color – a 1933 Georges Braque; a 1928 Matisse, and *Girl Before a Mirror*, a 1932 Picasso which now hangs in the Museum of Modern Art.

Available abroad by subscription, less expensive than oil paintings, and easier to transport, perhaps these magazines and special edition pochoirs (the manufacture of which was overseen by the artists themselves) were being regularly sent to Japan. This might explain the diffusion of modern art in Japan and the degree of color accuracy the Japanese were able to achieve.

John Clark writes that Japanese artists, many of whom had studied in France and Germany, aligned with Dadaism, Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism and Automatism. They had their own associations and exhibited regularly in a salon system established by the Japanese government.¹⁵ Those artists, or their associations, may have subscribed to some of the French art magazines.

¹⁵ John Clark, "Artistic Subjectivity in the Taisho and Early Showa Avant-Garde", in *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 41 – 53.

In France, Japan's most famous ambassador of modern art was Leonard Foujita. The caption of a photo from *Kiki's Paris*¹⁶ says it is taken from a newsreel, so Foujita may have been as celebrated in his time as Andy Warhol in the 60s and 70s.

Foujita's popularity can be gauged by the following story, also from *Kiki's Paris*: Around July or early August of 1929, Foujita received a tax bill in the amount of 100,000 French francs. The authors write:

*Foujita decided to make a large exhibition in Tokyo to raise money. He ... left Paris around August 15 and arrived in Kobe on September 23. [He] had two highly successful exhibitions in October [at the Asahi Newspaper Exhibition Hall and the Mitsukoshi Department Store], accompanied by an elegant catalogue with color reproductions.*¹⁷

The speed with which he accomplished this – less than 3 months from start to finish - and the two prestigious venues he secured, indicate the esteem in which he was held in Japan, as well as Japan's keen interest in the modern art movement.

Illustrious Mitsukoshi, perhaps by no coincidence, had a large kimono business. Westerners are surprised that department stores held – and hold – important art exhibitions. But this confluence of art and commerce creates the perfect setting for kimono designers, providing in one location inspiration, display space, exhibition tie-ins and a tailor-made clientele.

A well known work by American Regionalist painter Georgia O'Keeffe is her 1927 *Radiator Building – Night, New York*.¹⁸ The vertical city, lighting the night with electricity, was a very popular theme during the Machine Age, so this painting - or one of many like it - may have inspired at least one kimono¹⁹.



Figure 6 (left). Night lights kimono.

Figure 7 (right). O'Keeffe-like panel, undulating red, black and white.

Interestingly, both the design repeat and the panels of the kimono are juxtaposed so the dots appear to be as random as the lights in the Radiator Building.

¹⁶ Billy Kluver and Julie Martin, *Kiki's Paris: Artists and Lovers 1900-1930* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 181, plate 5.

¹⁷ Ibid, 201.

¹⁸ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

¹⁹ See Figure 6 – night lights kimono.

O’Keeffe also did a painting called *Pederal* in 1941²⁰, whose undulations, alternating rows of shades of red and black, and feathering of color are echoed in an unusual Japanese textile panel.²¹

World War II made refugees out of almost all of Europe’s artistic community, many of whom fled to New York.

Mondrian was one of those. His iconic work *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, was painted in 1942-43, after his move to the United States.

It seems possible that *Broadway Boogie Woogie* could have inspired a similar, if simplified, kimono - the *Ginza Boogie Woogie*?²²



Figure 8 (left). *Ginza Boogie Woogie* kimono.

Figure 9 (right). *Leger-like* kimono.

The war shifted the modern art scene from Europe to the United States. While WWII left much of Europe in tatters until the 60s, it lifted the United States out of the Depression and put it in front economically, bringing attention to American culture.

In 1950, American artist Adolph Gottlieb painted *The Seer*.²³ A very strong theme in early 20th century art was the subconscious, stemming from the burgeoning interest in psychoanalysis. Many art titles of the time come from Greek mythology, as it was felt that the Greek myths embodied the universality of all human experience. By the same token, it was suggested, might there not be pictographs that embodied universal thought? Gottlieb’s orderly rows and boxes imply an intelligible message, and the earthy colors evoke clay tablets.

The Montgomery Collection contains a vastly simplified version, in which the designer has perhaps rejected the psychological concept, but has embraced the visual concept.²⁴ And because it’s a kimono, he has added splashier color, but the timing is probably close to contemporary.

²⁰ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

²¹ See Figure 7 – undulating red, black, white.

²² See Figure 8 – *Ginza Boogie Woogie*.

²³ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

²⁴ Not reproduced here – see See Annie Van Assche, ed., *Fashioning Kimono: Dress and Modernity in Early Twentieth- Century Japan*, (5 Continents Editions, Milan, Italy, 2005), 274, plate 104.

In 1950, Fernand Léger created *Les Constructeurs*²⁵, which demonstrates his characteristic strong use of black in straight lines, wavy lines, dotted lines, cracked lines, checker-boards, crosses, stripes, polka dots, and mottled shading throughout. Léger also favors supersaturated colors.

Those characteristics appear to have been borrowed for a kimono that also features dots, dashes, very strong lines, mottling throughout, and supersaturated colors.²⁶

The post-war American government became obsessed with preventing the spread of the perceived communist threat. The government was determined to spread American culture, and occupied Japan received an especially heavy inoculation.

In an article entitled “The Growth of International Exchange in Early Postwar Japan”, Toshihiro Menju writes:

[T]he Civil Information and Education Section (CIE) ... established ... libraries in 24 locations throughout Japan. These libraries housed 210,000 books ... available to the general public ... Visitors to the libraries in 1950 apparently numbered 2.4 million.

*The occupation forces also ... distributed ... 1,300 movie projectors to local governments..., which were then obligated to screen American movies at least 20 times per month.*²⁷

The American Federation of Arts also promoted American art abroad, participating in exhibitions traveling to Japan and other countries between 1950 and 1970.

In his essay for *The Confusion Era: Art and Culture of Japan During the Allied Occupation, 1945 – 1952*, an exhibition at Washington’s Sackler Gallery, Donald Richie noted that “... Mitsukoshi ... held a showing of reproductions of modern French paintings in 1948” and that “the first Matisse and Picasso exhibitions ... arrived[d in Japan] in 1951.”²⁸

In an essay in *Scream Against the Sky*, Alexandra Munroe notes that Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings also arrived in 1951²⁹. The number of modern art kimonos seems to rise appreciably at this time, and it is likely that their production is directly related to the sudden large scale increase in art shows and the Japanese public’s enthusiasm for them.

How to reinterpret a classic Pollock drip painting for a young woman’s kimono? Perhaps a designer would add a little girlish color to it, and make the lines a little friendlier.³⁰

²⁵ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

²⁶ See Figure 9 – Léger -like kimono.

²⁷ Toshihiro Menju, Grassroots Network, Japan Center for International Exchange, *The Growth of International Exchange in Early Postwar Japan*, Issue 5, October 1, 2002 <http://www.jcie.or.jp/grassroots/5.html>

²⁸ “The Occupied Arts”. In Mark Sandler, ed. *The Confusion Era: Art and Culture in Japan During the Allied Occupation*. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. (Seattle, Wa. and London: University of Washington Press, 1998), 14.

²⁹ “To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun: The Gutai Group”, Munroe, Alexandra, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 99.

³⁰ See Figure 10 – Pollock-like kimono.

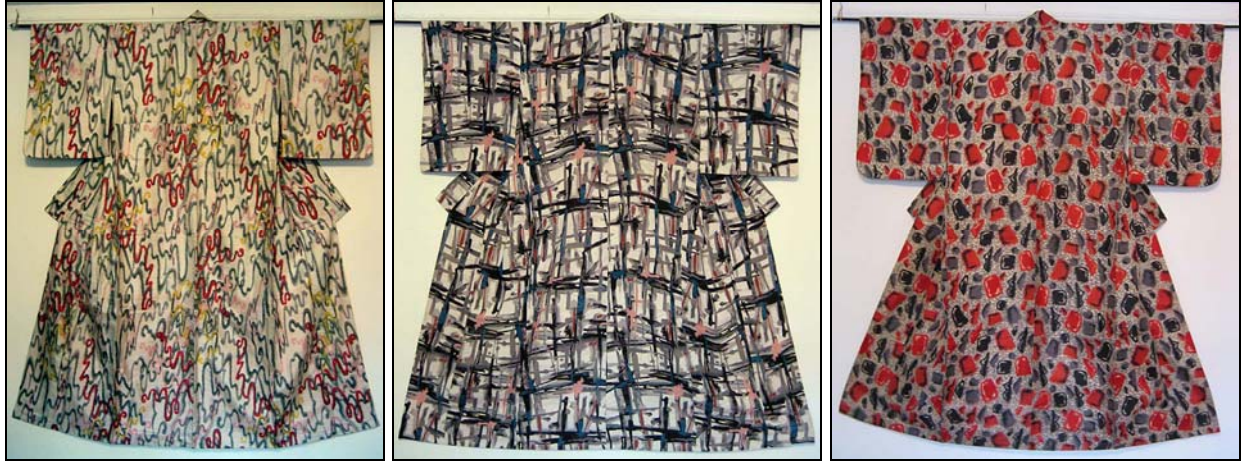


Figure 10 (left). Pollock-like kimono.

Figure 11 (center). Action art kimono.

Figure 12 (right). Dali-esque kimono with rocks and clouds.

Life Magazine seems to have been an invaluable resource for Japanese artists, both for the receipt and dissemination of information about the contemporary art scene. Pollock appeared in a large feature in 1949. Rothko, Motherwell, de Kooning, the aforementioned Gottlieb, Barnett Newman and Hans Hoffman appeared together in a 1951 article. Munroe notes that Japan's avant-garde Gutai artists put together an exhibition specifically for *Life* magazine in 1956.³¹

In the early 1950s the Gutai faction saw a photo essay on Georges Mathieu, a French action painter, in *Life* magazine.³² In 1957 Georges Mathieu appeared at Osaka's Daimaru Department Store, demonstrating action painting.³³ Could he have been invited on the strength of the *Life* article? An action painting kimono is very likely contemporary.³⁴



Figure 13 (left). Boy's ubugi with prawns. Figure 14 (right). Dali curtain.

³¹ "To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun: The Gutai Group", Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 90.

³² Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940 -- Strategies of Being*, 2nd edition, (Laurence King, Prentice-Hall, and New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), p. 177.

³³ Not reproduced here. See Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 95, plate 6.19.

³⁴ See Figure 11 – action art kimono

Another kimono is in all likelihood derived from Salvador Dalí.³⁵ Interestingly, although Japan had a strong Surrealist movement, and Dalí was well respected there, Surrealism does not seem to have transferred very well to kimono design. John Clark writes that early surrealism was erroneously associated with communism in Japan, with the result that Japanese surrealists practiced some self-censorship.³⁶ Perhaps that put a damper on surrealist kimono production.

On the other hand, perhaps we could question our definition of surrealism. The 1937 Schiaparelli – Dalí collaboration – a gown with an image of a lobster, worn by the Duchess of Windsor, is recognized as a surrealist dress³⁷. By contrast, an infant boy's kimono with similar images of prawns is recognized merely as having auspicious designs auguring long life.³⁸

But to return to the previous kimono, in the '50s Dalí did a series of mass produced textiles, and it seems entirely possible that our Japanese textile artist has borrowed his design not from a Dalí painting but one or more Dalí textiles.

The 1934 Dalí etching entitled *Les Chants de Maldoror*³⁹ is characterized by a distant horizon, converging lines, small random stones and other objects that cast very long shadows.

These themes metamorphose some 20 years later in a bark cloth curtain.⁴⁰ Some earlier themes are repeated, including the scattered stones, but the pseudo-scientific instrument, the obsessive shading, and the brassy red are elements of 1950s textile art. The hump-backed clouds are of particular interest.

Since they were home furnishings, pictures of Dalí curtains might have appeared in such hearthside reading as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, or a department store ad in a daily newspaper. Perhaps these were among the magazines and newspapers read in CIE libraries in Japan.



Figure 15 (left). Dali-esque kimono (detail).

Figure 16 (right). Color field kimono.

³⁵ See Figure 12 – Dali-esque kimono

³⁶ “Artistic Subjectivity in the Taisho and Early Showa Avant-Garde”, in *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 49 – 50.

³⁷ Not reproduced here. See Google Images.

³⁸ See Figure 13 – boy's kimono with prawns.

³⁹ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

⁴⁰ See Figure 14 – Dalí curtain.

In a close-up of the kimono⁴¹, it is clear that the textile artist has chosen to focus solely on the stones. As in the Dalí curtain, there is the obsessive multicolored shading, the brassy red, and note that the previous hump backed clouds have been transformed into stones.

By the early 1950s abstract art had returned to celebrating color for its own sake, but in large untamed patches of rich color. One of the fathers of color field art was the previously named Hans Hoffman, another WWII refugee. In 1961, Hoffman painted *The Golden Wall*.⁴²

Hoffman's work may have been seen by a textile designer who produced a very similar work that mirrors the color field movement.⁴³

A brief comment should be made about kimono material. The color field kimono is made of tsumugi, a short-fibered nubby waste silk. Most of the kimonos shown here were made of meisen, stenciled silk of lower quality fiber. One other is tsumugi, and one might be rayon. Others (not shown here) have been made of wool. It is interesting to note that not one is made of the best quality silk. This begs the question 'why?', and raises interesting issues.

In the kimono hierarchy, the best material is reserved for the most formal occasions, and the most formal occasions call for very traditional, and sometimes very understated, designs. Modern art designs were clearly embraced as novelty items, injecting freshness into the fashions of the times. By that definition, they would not have been appropriate for the most formal occasions. There might also have been an element of disposability. A formal kimono, good for years of use at multiple events; is a wise investment. A modern art kimono is by definition part of a trend, and in a few years' time might look dated, rather than chic.

This is not to disparage either tsumugi or meisen. Tsumugi has a warm texture which enriches its colors, and it can be very expensive. Generally affordable meisen has a stiff, flat surface, somewhat reminiscent of a canvas, which shows abstract art to excellent advantage.

Now this survey proceeds to the 1960s. Let's conclude by taking a look at op art, which is actually where the modern art kimono trend starts to taper off. And perhaps this is as it should be, since Japan had begun to reclaim its identity around the time it hosted the 1970 World's Fair.



Figure 17. Op art kimono.

⁴¹ See Figure 15 – Dali-esque kimono detail.

⁴² Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

⁴³ See Figure 16 – color field kimono.

The goal of op, or optical, art was to confuse the eye and even physically disorient the viewer with abstract images divided up geometrically and painted in opposing colors. Op art master Victor Vasarely's *Anadir*, from 1958-59, is a good example.⁴⁴

And to close, an op art kimono that demonstrates both the textile designer's and the wearer's connoisseurship of the what would then have been the latest in modern art trends.⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ Not reproduced here – see Google Images.

⁴⁵ See Figure 17 – op art kimono.